
'Fatherless' of Mohammad Mosavat: The cultural event of the Iranian spring

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The following is a psychoanalytic commentary about a play recently performed in Tehran (Iran) followed by an interview with its author, Mohammad Mosavat. The co-signatories both attended a performance of this play. Invited by Shahid Behesti, Alzahra, and Shiraz Universities for many public lectures and supervisions, the French psychoanalyst Jean-Luc Vannier signs the commentary while the interview and the translation were conducted by the Iranian psychoanalyst in training at the Freudian Group of Tehran, Mahyar Ali Naghi.

Blood, cannibalism, wild howlings and anxiety – they are to be cut with a knife. The scene is reduced to a dark staircase with doors that are opened and closed surreptitiously or even slammed like a violent slap inflicted on the viewer. In one word: a subtly crazy show, intelligently subversive, with this avant-garde edge brimming with symbols, analytical references but also political messages. This would be nothing surprising for a London or Berlin stage. Except that *Fatherless*, the theatre play written by the young Mohammad Mosavat, founder of the Radical 14 Troupe and who had so far directed successful pieces such as *Friday Noon Story*, *Vadeh House*, *Beyzai*, and *Yaftabad*, is played to a full house for April and May 2017 in a studio located in the basement of the large Qashqaei Hall of the City Theatre Complex, in the heart of Tehran, the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Based on the renowned folk Iranian story of *Shangool va Mangool*, linked to one of the fables of Aesop, *Wolf and Lamb*, six young actors Alireza Goldehi (*Mangool*), Kourosh Shahouneh (*Shangool*), Milad Ariaifar (*Habbe ye Angoor*), Ali Hosseinzadeh (*Gorgak*, *The Big Wolf's son*), Ebrahim Naeij (*Maman Bozi*, *Mother goat*) and Hossein Monfared (*Gorge*, *The Big Wolf*) are boldly surfing on the perversion of the asymmetrical relations between adults and children, with an explicit sexual drive dimension that is reminiscent of Professor Jean Laplanche's concept of 'fundamental anthropological situation'. In a deluge of dynamic scenes and word games more untranslatable than each other, Mohammad Mosavat describes with a wicked sense of humour the tyranny of the powerful against the weak, as well as the

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sadistic pleasure of the unlimited power. To the point of accepting a fallacious market of inversion of allegiances in the so-called wedding, impossible like the sexual intercourse as Lacan said, of the wolf with the lamb – Does not the sadist meet sexually enjoyment by interposed masochism?

Composed of mainly young people, artist and – how is it already said in French – committed intellectuals, the public whose first ranks agree to attend the performance on the soil due to the lack of seats, delights itself and reserves a standing ovation to the spectacle which become, over the days and by a collective identification process, a veritable ‘talk of the town’. We personally come out of this performance with a strange feeling of derealisation, a bit like the experts in experiential marketing who artificially create a closed consumerist cosmos in order to, for a time, make us forget who we are (depersonalisation) and where we are (derealisation). Due probably to an excessive intensity of their interpretation, the actors with the dazed look come to greet without being able to appreciate the warm acclamations that are addressed to them. They, too, temporarily sank into the abyss of a psychotic episode after assuming for almost two hours such heavy and destructive mental characters.

Inspired by the respect and the attachment to the ancestral, where has the ‘real’ father been? – in order to better hammer the contemporary tragedies, this particularly creative play, where the mask of laughter barely conceals the ferocity of the criticism, signs by its only realisation a cultural event of a rare significance for the ‘Iranian spring’: that of daring to show and say, not yet directly but more indirectly, that of sharing with that complicity of those who ‘speak to the gates so that the walls hear’ like the famous Iranian saying, genuine message of hope. **Nice, French Riviera, May 2017, Jean-Luc Vannier.**



Credit: Samaneh Jouya

How did you come to have the idea of such a play? What about the psychic process of creation?

In the same category, I have another play titled *Khanevaade* (family), but it is a split of family, as in *khane* (home) *vaade* (abandoned). That is the way I designed the title. Of course the wording *Khanevaade* would not be downright translatable to English or French, just like *bi pedar* (fatherless) which is a curse word in Persian, meaning a bastard and at the same time referring to someone without a father. As I said, *Khanevaade* almost dealt with the same issues as in *Fearless*. It told the story of family as the smallest social institution, but narrated a family's hazards and challenges with a dictator father. The play criticised all this to a great extent. While directing *Khanevaade* and because of the adolescent theme of that story, I thought 'why not write about Shangool va Mangool (The wolf and the three little goats)'. In the beginning, I regarded this as a joke and did not take it seriously. But gradually, it became something serious.

Did you have something precise in mind?

I rehearse a lot. And usually the play takes shape during a long process. The ideas keep changing place, so what come out a la fin, not exactly the first idea per se. This also happens for the script. Rudimentary ideas are replaced by the next ones in the work... I am in favour of a process close to experimental theatre, so I cannot tell you what was replaced with what and which came first, but in the end, what is on the stage is the final result. But of course, it is far more different than the first scheme. In the beginning, I was even aiming for a children fantasy genre, but that dark, bloody atmosphere was present since the very beginning. It came to become a gothic fantasy with some grotesque trend in the air. I mean to say that many details and ideas change throughout the process.

Was it something personal or more social?

No. When I come to write, my themes and motifs are absolutely not personal. I think the play mostly deals with social and political surrounding, even with those of outside world (outside Iran), like what is happening in the Middle East or even in Europe. I do not consider an ethnological or a geopolitical regard. I try to approach these issues like family or society and even politics in a broader spectrum. So I cannot say that the play is based on my internal world or my own lifestyle.

Why *Fatherless*?

I think the title is the first encounter between the play and its audience. I am very picky and sensitive when it comes to choosing one. I prefer to choose titles that would have a function beyond a mere name. *Bi Pedar* (Fatherless) was an intriguing and interesting name for me. Before writing a play, I tend to think about its title. It is like getting an ID card for a yet-not-born baby. Sometimes, the name becomes so exciting that it makes me write it. It was the case for *Fatherless*. As I already mentioned, the word fatherless holds different meanings and hence, it becomes somewhat playful. This playfulness starts with the very title. We can also observe it in the script and in the act as well.

What was the reason of using an old fairy tale? Is it an alibi? Or a reactivation of something internal?

No, it is not a reactivation at all. One might wonder that I am writing based on my nostalgia, but nostalgia does not play a major role to me as a person and I do not believe in nostalgic approaches at all. To me, it was mostly a material. The only amusing aspect of this tale is the fact that it can lend itself to the production of a play. This is the point that comes before anything else. Take Zidane and the World Cup 2006 final match: the story is beyond a match, a headbutt in Materazzi's chest, a red card or whatever. I even have a play named Zidane, written many years ago. That event brings me with lots of ideas beyond the man Zidane. This is what would be a material for a play and gives me another point of view. By Zidane, I mean something that maybe does not exist even in Zidane himself. In World Cup 2006, he chose not to be present, but to go for his desire. That is what I think applies to my reading of the fairy tale. I try to see the subject from the subversive viewpoint: somewhere outside the main circle on which the subject is circulating. This is something prevalent of eastern philosophies. Take Zen

Buddhism and its emphasis on the negative; or Haiku poetry: 'Frog is floating on the water bestowed to him by gripping to nothingness.' If I am going to extend this to the fairy tale, I should just point to the fact that the story of *The Wolf and the Goats* (Shangul va Mangul va Habbeye Angur) seems to be a children's tale but its grotesque and frightening nature seemingly renders it unsuitable for a child or adolescent. Here, a night story that seems to be designed for putting one to sleep is actually being used for awakening. My point is to take such things out of a short plot named 'The Wolf and the Goat'. In other words, my objective is to extricate things that are present in everything but are not accessible. This has always been interesting for me.

When you watch the play, while achieved, to you find out what you wanted?

I do not much remember what I wanted. Let me quote Hanibal Alkhas, the modern Iranian painter and designer who says: 'In the work of designing, one should welcome whatever comes up.' Or take the example of Francis Bacon, the painter, who picked up a pile of colour and threw to the canvas or Jackson Pollock, to give a more radical one. For all these three artists, creation is an event, but a controlled one. Personally, I believe in this sort of encounter. What one has in mind is not always the best thing that could happen. Sometimes, there are other events that could take shape outside of one's first impressions.

There are many symbolic and psychic (oral drive, blood, perversion between adult and child, etc.), even explicit sexual references in this play. Did you choose them consciously or not?

These go back to my taste and my interest. I very much like psychodrama. That is why I also love Michael Haneke. *Fatherless*, just like *Khaanevaade*, is a multidimensional, interdisciplinary play and that the sort of script I personally fancy. You can observe this in the performance as well. Political approach, social approach, didactic approach, concern for family, a psychological approach and sometimes a philosophical take are matters of my interest. I try to include them as far as I can. But sometimes, they just happen unconsciously, without me being aware of it, and influence my work.

How did you hire the actors?

I ran a six-month workshop for this play. It took me two months to choose the actors and we spent four months to rehearse and practise for the performance. The actors are not seasoned actors, so it took a long time for them to mentally prepare and get a glimpse of the project they are taking part in. Because of its special dimensions and its particular atmosphere, the play created resistance even in me. But fortunately, the crew believed in me, even more than I did believe in myself.

How can you explain the great success of such a theatre play among young Iranians?

It was really unexpected. I used to humorously tell the crew that in certain parts of the play, two rows of audience are going to leave the hall but this never happened. But I have to say that this success, though it can be something pleasant, is not so much a pleasant aspect to me. I believe that when we are dealing with an academic theatre, which of course has its experimental roots as well, the threat of failure is way greater than a hope for success. So I do not really care about this success whatsoever. In each performance, I find myself thinking about the next one; because it could well be that the next performance fails. In order not to suffer much from that possible failure, I prefer not to excessively enjoy this success as well. There is also another point: there is a gap between elite, intellectual, or experimental theatre, and classical theatre. I filled the gap. Experimental theatre is the usual name given to plays from which the audience understands almost nothing. As this process of comprehension, such genre of theatre usually fails. On the other hand, as classical or narrative theatre is going lethargic (is sliding down and becoming unattractive); it is facing the same destiny. I have filled the gap between these two. Though I narrate a story, I am also rooted in experimental approach as well. I think this sort of play is what we miss on the stage these days. My play can be understood by a simple-minded, ordinary person, as well as by some sophisticated university professor of high education. This is the golden point when it comes to encounter with the audience.

Why did you choose this particular hall?

We were supposed to play in a private hall, but we could not afford it and there was the threat that we might make it to the stage and wanted to stop the whole project. We then came to the City Hall and its manager. Mr Shariati, who in my mind was in a revolutionary decision, accepted the performance. Otherwise, I do not know what would come out of *Fatherless*. This experience really shows how an efficient and through cultural management could be of vital importance. But this hall was not my first choice. I needed somewhere with a way higher ceiling. I had to change the mise-en-scène according to the conditions at hand.

In the brochure, there is the announcement for the next play entitled, *Van Gogh*. Do you have other creations in perspective?

Most probably, it did not be *Van Gogh*. These are just the games I play; maybe I would work on *Van Gogh* in four years' time from now and maybe I never work on it. This is mostly a game for me; just an announcement to say that I still want to work on a script and produce a play again. It does not matter; I may call it *Van Gogh* or something else. Now, I am just examining the possible future options. Besides, I believe that it is important to consider the previous play you have produced when thinking about the next. The social and political changes in one's surrounding should respectively be issued in the next play. For example, given the dark and aggressive air of *Fatherless*, maybe my next creation would be something happier. I believe in the change as well.

What can you tell us about the message a viewer of your play should have?

This is one of the questions I do not fancy much. Sometimes talking about certain issues sort of ruins and spoils them. During different interviews about this play, I have been trying not to avoid such discussion as what are the social or whatever kind of messages that they play should convey or is actually conveying.

Do you have any intentions in other countries? Like the ones with Iranian community?

I very much like the idea, though this has not yet happened; partly due to my own laziness and sluggishness, and partly because I was not much concerned with travelling abroad to present my work. But why not? It must be a very interesting experience. . But it must not be limited to Iranian people of living overseas. I think *Fatherless* and *Khaanevaade* are among those plays with which any audience from any language or culture or point of view can relate.

NB: Interview and translation by Mahyar Ali Naghi, Beheshti University